Ezra Pound

(1885-1972)

Canto XLV (1937)

With Usura

With usura hath no man a house of good stone
Each block cut smooth and well fitting
That design might cover their face,
With usura
Hath no man a painted paradise on his church wall
Harpes et luthes
Or where virgin receiveth message
And halo projects from incision,
With usura
Seeth no man Gonzaga his heirs and his concubines
No picture is made to endure nor to live with
But it is made to sell and sell quickly
With usura, sin against nature,
Is thy bread ever more of stale rags
Is thy bread dry as paper,
With no mountain wheat, no strong flour
With usura the line grows thick
With usura is no clear demarcation
And no man can find site for hs dwelling.
Stone cutter is kept from his stone
Weaver is kept from his loom
WITH USURA
Wool comes not to the market
Sheep bringeth no gain with usura
Usura is a murrain, usura
Blunteth the needle in the maid's hand
And stoppeth the spinner's cunning. Pietro Lombardo
Came not by usura
Nor Pier della Francesca; Zuan Bellin' not by usura
Nor was 'La Calunnia' painted.
Came not by usura Angelico; came not Ambrogio Praedis,
Came no church of cut stone signed: *Adamo me fecit*.
Not by usura St Trophime
Not by usura Saint Hilaire,
Usura rusteth the chisel
It rusteth the craft and the craftsman
It gnaweth the thread in the loom
None learneth to weave the gold in the pattern;
Azure hath a canker by usura; cramoisi is unbroidered
Emerald findeth no Memling
Usura slayeth the child in the womb
It stayeth the young man's courting
It hath brought palsey to bed, lyeth
Between the young bride and her bridegroom
CONTRA NATURAM
They have brought whores for Eleusis
Corpses are set to banquet
At behest of usura.

ANALYSIS

To many a reader, the poetry of Spenser seems also a masque: a succession of devices that dazzle in themselves but that do not effectively support an intended meaning. At any rate, the masque and poems like Spenser's demand a mode of apprehension that we do not now readily provide. For such readers…the masque remains a series of masks: emblems or devices scarcely worth the labor of grasping.

A like feeling may arise from a reading of Ezra Pound's *Cantos.* Here also the disparate elements are—if our knowledge of history and language is equal to the task Pound sets—intelligible. But satisfactory reading of the poem requires us to cope with a succession of devices no less variegated and distracting than those in an old masque; and some readers relinquish *The Cantos* in somewhat the way they give up Spenser's poem. Pound's devices, of course, have little resemblance to Spenser's; but both can produce discouragement. And against such an ebbing of curiosity there is no further argument.

But there remain (for Pound as for Spenser) readers who feel that it is wrong to assume that a complex poem is the product either of perverse ingenuity or of intellectual pride. These readers feel that out of a scrutiny of the devices, meaning is likely to emerge. This feeling has "paid off" for Spenser; it can also "pay off" for Pound and *The Cantos*, and in terms which the rhetoric and the devices of the poem itself provide. At any rate, the methods of reading that I am going to identify are, I think, in accord with Pound's inclusive purpose in *The Cantos* and his conception of the proper way to gratify that purpose. *The Cantos* are an attack on the userer's civilization in which we live, and they also draw our attention to the comparative excellence of civilizations which escaped usury and achieved, if not heaven, humanity.

The rhetoric that serves this purpose seems to strike out in a variety of directions—directions not logically consistent with each other. But it is not on the basis of logic that Pound would have the effectiveness of his rhetorical devices judged. He is concerned with coercing the emotions to follow a new and proper course. Pound often tries, it is true, to take the will of the reader by frontal attack; but if it seems likely to him that sorties from other directions will cause the citadel to fall, he does not draw back because the projected sorties wold mar the "purity" of an all-over plan. To use an earlier figure, we can observe that Pound holds up a variety of masks between us and him; but we are hasty if we take variety as the equivalent of willfulness.

Perhaps we would be more likely to estimate the variety justly if we recall their beginnings in Pound's earlier work. Here there are two habits of composition that are useful to isolate (they are not isolated in *The Cantos*). The first we may call the habit of imagism, and the second the habit of dramatic monologue. Both of these habits provide Pound with a technique of disavowal, of withdrawal from the onus of responsibility for what has been said. That Pound—in pre-*Canto* days—should have desired effects of disavowal is understandable and is part of his general protest against romantic poetry and the poet's *personal* embrace of all that experience presents him. Any sort of reality—the reality that Pound has faith in: persons and places that existed or exist at a certain time—is, in romantic poetry, perceived only mistily through a cloud that the poet's enthusiasm suffuses over concrete objects, distorting and even hopelessly disguising what was "given" by reality. Pound's early styles aim at correcting romantic excesses; they are designed to cut back the rank, needless growth in the garden of poetry, to establish the outlines of the objects themselves. So viewed, a poem is chiefly successful in its power to suggest the qualities and the nuances of the object—qualities and nuances that should not be distorted by what the poet feels about them.

In this task, imagism is highly useful. Imagism—its practitioners tell us—was an effort to return to the object and render it in its own terms. Or if the object cannot be rendered in its own terms (what object can be since the practice of any art implies limitation of means and selection?), it should be (in poetry) rendered in as close an approximation to those terms as language provides. Pound later censured imagism as it was practiced because it came to regard as its only proper subject the inert natural phenomenon, such as the fir tree or the wave. The imagists did not grow in grace; they did not perceive that they must pass from the static natural object to the dynamic natural object, the human being and his various societies. (It is these that Pound has in mind when he indicates that much of *The Cantos* is devoted to "ideas in action": there are

no Platonic overtones in Pound's rhetoric which is in the service of the only sort of "idea" Pound believes in—an idea that exists in a certain context, from which it may not be separated.) One may anticipate and suggest that the other "devices" of *The Cantos* but serve to make more flexible and responsive to the wider task of rendering "ideas in action" the earlier techniques of imagism. They strive to preserve the basic excellence of imagism, the tone of disavowal, and they are calculated to overcome its defect—its tendency to a limited treatment of a static subject-matter.

One should note here that Pound's early efforts to render the object (and not the poet's yeasty soul in the presence of the object) had sanction from another quarter; the example of Chinese poetry. The connection, for Pound, between imagism and Chinese poetry is easy to state. One may put the matter thus. Imagism comes easily to the Chinese and is difficult for us of the West. Our intellectual history is—in Pound's opinion—disfigured by the recurrence of useless abstractions—ideas no longer "in action"—which preside over our poetry when sheer overt egotism does not. For the Chinese the basic unit of written expression is the ideogram: a symbol for a word which still bears, for the instructed, a picture of the object the word refers to. The ideogram binds the Chinese poet to objects, and his poetry can be no more than an arrangement of them which will coerce comment in the mind of his reader or hearer—comment that the poet is not allowed, by the canons of his art as well as by the nature of his language, to make himself. In contrast, only by a great effort of will and intelligence can the Western poet put aside the evil habits natural to Western expression. He must consciously bind himself to objects; but no matter how firmly he makes the bonds, he will continue to work with the uneasy sense that knots are slipping, permitting him to fall back on abstractions or into the vagaries of personal emotion.

The other support, in the early Pound, to the mode of disavowal is the habit of the dramatic monologue. A form of long lineage ending in the poetry of Browning (whom Pound respects), it provides the form in which much of the early poetry and *The Cantos* as well are set. One can say—with great profit if we wish to see the value of the dramatic monologue as a vehicle of disavowal—that Pound has his points of difference with Browning. All of Browning's *personae*, however local and odd they are to our first view, tend of become Robert Browning himself. This doubtless happened because of Browning's own imperious sense that a basic collection of truth exists towards which every human being—Sludge the Medium as well as Rabbi Ben Ezra—will grope and stumble. So, for Browning, the dramatic monologue was not a means of disavowal. It was, instead, the means of the strongest sort of avowal. How does Pound alter the "economy" of the monologue so that it becomes, for him, a means of disavowal?

Pound, I feel, does not know his historical periods better than Browning knows his. But Pound treats them better, not translating them (somehow, anyhow) into terms in instructed and optimistic pantheistic argument, but preserving them in an aura proper to their own times. Browning's "sin" is covertly to place his personages in comparatively specious conjunction to the aura of the poet's own time or the poet's own belief. Pound—in *The Cantos* as well as in the early *Personae*—strives to preserve for each historical personage the aura of his own period. To be thus faithful excuses the poet from making any kind of comment on the object presented; his "job" seems to be delimited, to consist only of presenting the person justly, without comment or comparison. Clearly, Pound's approach to a Chinese frontier guard is different from Browning's to, say, Andrea del Sarto. Pound wishes to "render" the guard, this particular "idea in action"; whereas Browning wishes to display the Browning that moves—imperfectly, unrealized—in Andrea del Sarto.

Harold H. Watts
Ezra Pound and the Cantos
(Regnery 1952) 47-55